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ABSTRACT

In the past, books for children treated death fearfully, morbidly, and didactically, but now children's literature treats death in a more realistic manner and is sensitive to its emotional aspects. Current theories suggest that children perceive death differently at various ages. G. P. Koocher (1973) used J. Piaget's cognitive stages as the basis for a theory of the development of children's feelings about death. M. Nagy (1959) proposed three conceptual stages of children: death as sleep, death as permanent, and death as permanent and universal. E. Kubler-Ross (1969) identified five stages that occur when one is confronted with death: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The overall theme of death in children's books can be divided topically into pets, parents, grandparents, siblings, and peers. A sixth grade class that was exposed to four books on death, to bring out the students' attitudes toward it, liked the books because they thought death should be understood, but at first they were uncomfortable discussing these books and their own perceptions of dying. (Authors and titles of books are provided, with a description of the basic story line, to demonstrate the existence of books that can help children understand and cope with death.) (SRT)

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DEATH: REALISM IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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DEATH: REALISM IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Introduction & Historical Perspective

Death as a theme in children's literature has changed throughout the years. In the 1700's and 1800's death was a morbid, fearful subject dealt with in a didactic manner. Death was a constant threat or punishment, as evidenced in this poem written in 1715 by Isaac Watts:

"Heaven and Hell"

"There is beyond the sky.
A heaven of joy and love;
And holy children, when they die,
Go to that world above.
There is a dreadful hell,
And everlasting pains;
There sinners must with devils dwell,
In darkness, fire, and chains.
Can such a wretch as I
Escape this cursed end?
And may I hope, whene'er I die,
I shall to heaven ascent?
Then will I read and pray,
While I have life and breath:
Lest I should be cut off today,
And sent to eternal death." (Demers and Moyles, 1982, p. 65)

Another example of the dreadful treatment of death in literature for children is seen in Henry Sharpe Horsley's 1828

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poem, entitled "The Death of A Mother":

"The Death of A Mother"

"Supported by the yielding pillow,
The tender Mother sat in bed,
With her children weeping round her,
With list'ning ears at what she said.
She faintly utter'd, "My children,
Soon I must leave you, little dears;
Now I feel death's hand upon me,
But don't distress me with your tears.
The mandate's issued, I must leave you,
You feel the summons cruel, dears;
Death with hasty strides approaches,
Life's curtain draws - a new world appears." "(Demers and Moyles, 1982, pp. 156-157.)

In the late 19th Century, a new realism began to emerge in children's books dealing with death. Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (first printed in 1868)discussed death in a less morbid manner. Although higly emotional and sentimental, Beth's death was presented in a loving family atmosphere with no threat for her salvation: "with tears and prayers and tender hands, mother and sisters made her ready for the long sleep that pain would never mar again, ... to their darling death was a benignant angel, not a phantom full of dread .... a face so full of painless peace that those who loved it best smiled through their tears, and thanked God that Beth was well at last" (Alcott, 1915, pp. 446-447).

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Current Theories

Within the past fifteen years or so there have been a number of children's books written about death. Perhaps this may be attributed to the fact that children cannot escape exposure to death. Death is something that happens to all of us or affects us in some way, whether we've had a relative, friend, or pet die. Dealing with death in a realistic manner is an important part of today's children's literature.

Children perceive death as different things at various ages. Koocher (1973) suggested that the feelings about death are related to children's cognitive development. Using Piaget's cognitive stages, preoperational children think about death in an egocentric way. They may either choose to ignor death or relate it to their own experiences with death, if they have had any. Concrete operational children can conceptualize death in a concrete form and may become uniquely interested in the weapons or poisons leading to death. This interest may seem almost morbid. They also begin to suspect that they themselves will die someday. Formal operational children can abstractly conceptualize about death as a natural event in their lives. They begin to see death in a more realistic manner.

Nagy (1959) proposed three conceptual stages that children go through when confronted with death. In the first stage, children view death as a sleeping state only. They see no permanence to death. In the second stage, they see death as permanent, but not universal. In the third stage, they see death as permanent and universal. At this final stage they see their own mortality as reality.

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Kubler-Ross (1969), a noted authority on this subject, identified five stages that a survivor (or the dying person) goes through when confronted with death. The first stage is denial and isolation. This stage is marked with a numbness of sorts, where the patient or survivor refuses to eat or sleep. The second stage is one of anger. The person is furious that this has happened to him/her. S/he feels they have lost control of his/her life and it makes him/her angry and bitter. The third stage is bargaining. The person who is dying tries to bargain for more time or the survivor tries to bargain to get the deceased person back. The fourth stage is depression. Hopelessness and feelings of failure are common emotions at this stage. The fifth stage is acceptance. The survivor remembers the good things about the dead person and learns to live with the grief.

Current Books For Children Dealing With Death

In general, there appears to be five topics within the overall theme of death in children's books, namely the presentation of the death of: pets, parents, grandparents, siblings, and peers.

Death of a Pet

The death of a pet is a somewhat popular theme in picture books for children. It is perhaps somewhat easier for children to deal with the death of an animal than the death of a relative or friend, although some animals are perceived as family too. In Jim's Dog Muffins by Miriam Cohen, first grader Jim has to deal with the death of his pet dog. At first he wants to be left alone, but later he accepts his friend Paul's attempt to comfort

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him with pizza. " "She was the nicest dog." Paul said. "Yes," said Jim. And they walked home together." (unpaged)

In The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst, Barney the cat dies and his owner thinks of nine good things about Barney. The parents help supply reason number ten: "He'll change until he's part of the ground in the garden. He'll help grow the flowers, and he'll help grow that tree and some grass." (p.19)

In Tobi Tobias' Petey, Emily's pet gerbil Petey dies and Emily has to learn to deal with his passing. Emily misses Petey a lot: "Everytime I look at the empty cage I feel empty inside me." (p. 27) When she refuses a new gerbil to replace Petey, her mother puts it all in perspective: "I never said it would be the same. It can be different, Em, and still be good" (p. 28).

Edith Thacher Hurd's The Black Dog Who Went Into the Woods, is about a dog who dies and is fondly remembered by each member of the family through a series of dreams. Each family member comes to accept his passing by remembering the good times s/he had with Black Dog.

I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm, tells of the love that grows between a boy and his dog. When the dog dies, the boy is sad, but he's comforted by the fact that he always told his dog how much he loved him.

Death of a Parent

The death of a parent is a highly emotional loss for a child. In the picture book Everett Anderson's Goodbye by Lucille Clifton, Everett Anderson goes through the five stages of a

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survivor while grieving the death of his father. He begins to accept the loss when he says: "I know my daddy loved me through and through, and whatever happens when people die, love doesn't stop, and neither will I." (unpaged)

There are more books for older children with the theme of the death of a parent. In Patricia Hermes' You Shouldn't Have to Say Good-Bye, Sarah must deal with her mother's cancer and eventual death. This book shows Sarah going through all of the steges that a typical survivor goes through also in dealing with the loss. She denied the death, became angry, did some bargaining, was depressed, and finally accepted it: "I know I'm getting better. I know I'm growing up and learning a lot of things. And spring is coming, and I know I'm going to plant a garden. But I know something else. Mom is dead. And it stinks." (p.117)

In Mama's Going to Buy You a Mockingbird by Jean Little, Jeremy and his sister deal with the death of their father. After watching the first snowfall, Jeremy's thoughts shift to his father's memory: " "I hate you. I hate you!" he choked. He did not know to whom he cried out or against whom. Was it God or death? Or was it himself, loving the first snowfall and still alive to see it?" (p. 190)

Tiger Eyes by Judy Blume, is about a girl named Davey whose father is murdered. Davey goes through the stages of the survivor also. She denies that it happened by not telling people about it. She is angry that her father has died and almost blames herself. Later she remembers the good times, and finally she accepts his death: "Goodbye Daddy. I love you. I'll always

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love you. This doesn't mean that I'm never going to think about you anymore. This doesn't mean that I'm never going to think about that night, either. Because that night happened. And there's nothing I can do to change the facts. But from now on I'm going to remember the good times. From now on I'm going to remember you full of life and full of love." (p.190)

Death of a Grandparent

The death of a grandparent is something most children will eventually face. Several picture books discuss this issue. In The Two of Them by Aliki, a young girl and her grandfather share a special relationship and she is deeply upset when he dies: "She knew that one day he would die. But when he did, she was not ready, and she hurt inside." (unpaged)

Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs by Tomie de Paola, tells of Tommy's love for his grandmother (Nana Downstairs) and his great-grandmother (Nana Upstairs). When Nana Upstairs dies, Tommy is comforted by his mother who tells him: "She will come back in your memory whenever you think about her." (unpaged)

Christmas Moon by Denys Cazet, tells how Patrick (a bunny) misses his grandfather who has died. Patrick reminisces about his grandfather with his mother and tells her: "When I was with Grandpa I didn't feel little." (unpaged)

Death of a Sibling

The death of a sibling is often a situation ridden with guilt for the remaining child. This issue is dealt with in a tender manner in the picture book Last Week My Brother Anthony Died by Martha Whitmore Hickman. Julie tells about the death of her

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four-week-old brother. A friend helps her deal with this grieveful time by telling her: "The sad feelings come and go, like clouds." (unpaged)

A book for older children is Louis Lowry's A Summer To Die in which plain Meg is jealous of her beautiful sister Molly, until Molly gets leukemia and eventually dies. At first Meg is very angry: " "And why Molly? Dad, I'm the one who always got in trouble! Molly never did anything bad!" " (p. 122) Finally she begins to accept Molly's illness and eventual death: "Time goes on, and your life is still there, and you have to live it. After a while you remember the good things more often than the bad. Then gradually, the empty silent parts of you fill up with sounds of talking and laughter again, and the jagged edges of sadness are softened by memories." (p.140)

Death of a Friend

The death of a friend is also a difficult situation to deal with. Several books for older children are available that touch upon this subject. Doris Buchanan Smith's A Taste of Blackberries, is about a young boy whose friend Jamie dies after receiving a bee sting that he is allergic to. This boy denies Jamie's death: "It seemed that as long as I acted like he wasn't dead, he wouldn't be dead." (p.32) His questioning and anger are inherent when he listens to a grownups explanation of what happened: " " Honey, one of the hardest things we have to learn is that some questions do not have answers." I nodded. This made more sense than if she tried to tell me some junk about God needing angels." (p.43) His acceptance of Jamie's death becomes apparent at the end of the book: "In my relief I felt that

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Jamie, too, was glad the main sadness was over. I wondered how fast angels, or whatever he was now, could move. "Race you," I called to him and I ran up the hill." (p. 58)

In Katherine Paterson's Bridge to Terabithia, a new realism in dealing with the death of a friend is evident. At first when Jess finds out that his friend Leslie is dead, he denies it and can't accept it because he doesn't confront the body. Then he sees her death as a way of making people feel sorry for him and to give him authority of sorts: "He was the only person his age he knew whose best friend had died. It made him important. The kids at school Monday would probably whisper around him and treat him with respect - the way they'd all treated Billy Joe Weems last year after his father had been killed in a car crash." (p.112) Then he feels anger at Leslie for deserting him: "She went and died just when he needed her the most." (p.114) Finally he accepts her death and gives new direction to his own life: "She wasn't there so he must go on for both of them. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength." (p.126)

A Sixth Grade Classes' Perceptions

To investigate children's attitudes toward books dealing with death, a sixth grade class in a middle class neighborhood of an urban area was visited. The students were read four books dealing with death (The Two of Them, The Black Dog Who Went Into The Woods, The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, and Everett Anderson's Goodbye). Death as a theme in these books was then discussed. These students felt very uncomfortable at first when

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the discussion began. Later they began to share more personal experiences and talked more openly about these books and their own perceptions of death. Some of their comments on why they didn't like a particular book were as follows: "They were sad." "They reminded me of my pet dying." "They were kind of scary." "The books were okay. It's real emotional books that I don't like because I'm a real emotional person." On the whole, however, they liked the books, for the following reasons: "They talk about something not many others do." "People should be able to talk about death freely." "They give you a better perspective of death." "I did like them, but death is not an easy subject to talk about since my grandpa died." "They could teach little kids about a person that died, and an animal that had died." "In a way they help you to understand death a little more."

Certainly an open forum for discussing these books is only a beginning. Exposure to more books dealing with the subject is important if true emotions and a better understanding of the whole concept of coping with death is considered a worthwhile and meaningful endeavor.

Conclusion

Death is a part of life. It is very important that we don't ignore death, but rather live with the awareness and acceptance of it. For many years children's books dealt with death in a threatening and frightening manner, or they ignored its existence altogether. Today many of the newer books treat death in a more realistic fashion and are sensitive to the emotional aspects of death. These books can help children become more aware of a real life situation and can give them examples of children like

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themselves who are able to cope with death and live their lives fully. Children's books of today strive to entertain and instruct children in the real life situations that they will face. To this extent they are far better for children to gain practical knowldge from than their earlier morbid and frightening counterparts.

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